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ABSTRACT

From a review of some 70 relevant studies, characteristics are identified that have been shown to influence student achievement. These include both characteristics of the learning environment and characteristics of the teacher. The "ideal" reading program that emerges is characterized by small classes; adequate space, materials, and physical facilities; individualized and group instruction; thorough diagnosis; and the presentation of skills in a systematic and hierarchical fashion. The teacher is sensitive, well-informed about reading, enthusiastic, and organized, respects and uses student input, and strives to improve his or her skills in the teaching of reading. (AA)

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THE IDEAL READING PROGRAM

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How should a reading program be organized so as to optimize a student's chances of learning? Certainly there are some pertinent factors which can be identified as conditions of efficient learning. In an attempt to identify these factors we conducted an extensive review of the research done in the last twenty years. In all some 70 studies were found that related to the basic issue under investigation - that issue being the identification of the characteristics of a reading program which have a relationship with student achievement. The characteristics seemed to fall into two broad areas: (1) characteristics of the learning environment and (2) characteristics of the teacher. These categories are admittedly artificial. The reader will note that there is some overlap in content from one category to another. The categories were established for ease of reporting and are used as a framework from which to discuss the many complex variables associated with a successful reading program.

Rather than cite a great many studies in each area, we have attempted to synthesize results and conclusions and make generalizations whenever they were warranted. Most studies were not experimental in nature. For some factors all that could be found was a set of guidelines apparently formulated using common sense. A comprehensive list of the studies reviewed is included at the end of this report.

Characteristics of the Learning Environment

Class size was one of the more obvious variables identified. There is a great deal of opinion but little fact about the relative merits of class size in organizing students for effective learning. The amount of research concerning class size and pupil learning is massive - over 300 separate studies have been catalogued; yet very few of the studies were based on sound research procedures. One of the better efforts on this topic was a five year study conducted by Furno and Collins (1967). Their basic conclusion was that, regardless of the student's background, chances are decidedly greater that he will learn more if he is in a small rather than large class. But how small is small? Furno states that most successful reading programs have no more than six students report at any given time to the reading teacher. It must be noted here that Furno was speaking specifically of remedial reading situations. The six per group criterion is supported by Cutts in his report entitled "A Model Program for Remedial Reading." He states that typically, effective remedial instruction seldom occurs in groups larger than four to six.

A note of caution should be entered here. According to Furno (1967) class size represents a more critical factor in pupil learning for children of limited mental ability than it does for children of higher mental ability. Thus, its importance as a factor in improving reading performance is greatest in remedial reading situations.

The physical surroundings of the learning environment is a commonly identified variable relating to achievement. Common sense tells us that there is no one way to set up a reading program. Consequently, little research has been done to isolate specific physical features of the learning environment. However, there is some rather strong and seemingly valid opinion concerning the physical "set up" of a reading lab.

Plant facilities vary according to many factors -- pupil needs, budgetary considerations, and space available. But common sense also tells us that a reading program, to be effective, commands some requisites. Special rooms should be made available. The rooms must have adequate floor space. The IRIS program (Cayton, 1973) suggests approximately 1,000 sq. ft. (40' x 25') for fifteen students. The need for a small counseling and testing area is also desirable. There must be space for individual work within the room. Flexibility is necessary and is achieved by use of movable equipment and furniture. Adequate floor space is necessary for carrels, chairs, shelving, storage cabinets, several filing cabinets, bookcases, chalkboards, and individual tables. Wiring is needed for good lighting and to accommodate the necessary electrical equipment.

Some of the "extras" to be considered are: air conditioning if the classroom is to be used year round. If funds are available, carpeting and such sound-absorbing materials as acoustical tile help lessen distractive noises. Another non-essential is a cupboard divided into compartments to be used to store pupils' work and books. Reading personnel should have access to a duplicator, paper cutter, typewriter, audio-visual equipment and other essential instructional equipment. Ideally, the physical environment should be able to accommodate individualized and group instruction. But in order to have individualized instruction, diagnosis must be an integral part of the program.

Thorough diagnosis pinpoints a student's weaknesses and strengths. Smith, Carter and Dapper (1972) in their guidelines for an effective reading program identify thorough diagnosis of student needs as a prime determiner of success. Studies by Graham (1969) and Boyle (1971) echo the need for diagnosis and the importance of a combination of individualized and group instruction.

The interaction of the type of materials employed and type of instruction used was examined by Summers(1964). He concluded that reading taught under any number of different circumstances will be successful if adequate materials are

used, if instruction is adjusted to individual differences and if competent staff is available for teaching.

Organization and presentation of skills also seems to be a factor related to success in reading instruction. Karlin (1963) states that a reading program should not use a "shot-gun approach" but should be thoughtful and well organized. His study gives some weight to the concept that teaching reading skills in a hierarchical fashion and on an individual basis improves reading ability in students.

Other environmental characteristics of good reading programs cited in the literature include: use of multi-media (McDonald and Nacke, 1969; Barth, 1974; Winklejohann, 1975); the need for teacher made materials specifically designed for individual student needs and interests (Early, 1969; Smith, Carter, Dapper, 1972); and the use of an eclectic approach in terms of teaching methodology (Bamman, 1964; Goltz, 1966).

Characteristics of the Teacher

Few studies could be found specific to the characteristics of reading teachers per se. However, there have been a number of studies which focused on teachers in general. Some of the characteristics of "good teachers" identified by the research (Ryans, 1960) include being: warm, friendly, understanding, responsive, businesslike, systematic, imaginative, specific and accepting. However accurate, these attributes are a little too vague to be much good in an applied sense. Virtually all of them are applicable to any profession in which there is interaction among people.

There has been some research done on the various types of student/teacher interactions and their effects. The effect of teacher criticism has been found to vary with the type of criticism employed. Mild criticism such as teacher

correction, is not related to achievement. However, the use of shame, sarcasm and other forms of strong criticism has been shown to be negatively related to learning (Rosenshine, 1969). The frequency of praise has not been found to be related to pupil achievement in general. However, the kind of praise used does make a difference. From his study on first and third graders, Wallen (1966) concluded that minimal reinforcement of verbal comments is positively related to achievement. Acceptance of students' ideas, use, application and comparison with other ideas also seems to be related to achievement. Some rather interesting findings were reported by Spaulding (1965). He states that the use of a warm or condescending voice is negatively related to achievement in the elementary grades. The hypothesized explanation for this is that children, especially boys, at the elementary level resent the "sugary" manner which is often associated with an adult speaking to a child. These findings also imply a possible "sex factor" entering into the teaching of reading.

Studies indicate that disabled boy readers outnumber disabled girl readers anywhere from 2 to 1 to 9 to 1 (Bannatyne, 1971), and that 70% of remedial reading referrals are boys (Blom, 1971). It has been postulated that school is perceived as "feminine" (Kagan, 1964), and consequently, a conflict is created between the appropriate male sex-role behavior and the behavioral expectations of schools (Grambs and Waetjen, 1966; Kagan, 1964). One variable that has been suggested to account for the "feminine" attitude toward schools is the predominance of female teachers (Austin, Clark, and Litchett, 1971; Ayres, 1909; Sears and Feldman, 1966). The National Education Association (1966) survey indicated that 86% of elementary teachers are female (inclusive of personnel such as specialists). A popular theory among researchers contends that an increase in the number of male teachers would "masculinize" the school culture, and consequently, act in overcoming reading problems of boys (Austin, et al, 1971; Grambs and Waetjen, 1966; Peltier, 1968).

There is conflicting evidence as to whether or not the kinds of questions and statements used by teachers has a relationship with student achievement. In a study by Soar(1966) teachers of high achieving students in the middle grades were found to follow a pattern of speaking for less than a minute in which they provided information. They then asked questions about that information eliciting responses from students and then commenting on those responses.

There is a great deal of evidence to show that the teacher does influence students in their selection of reading materials (Harris, 1969). The classroom teacher, or the teacher of reading, has a powerful role in choosing and promoting the materials read by the students. Teacher interest in certain materials can generate enthusiasm in students regardless of age level. Research further indicates that interest is "highly contagious" and that the teacher who displays interest fosters that interest in her students. A clear picture emerges of the need for the teacher of reading to be enthusiastic and continually conscious of his/her role in choosing reading materials.

In the minds of most people, teachers have always held a position of importance in the learning process. Harris and Morrison (19[illegible]) and Bond and Dykstra (1967) agree that the teacher is far more important than the method employed. They contend that teacher skills must be improved through inservice workshops and that expert consultant help should be provided for all teachers particularly those with minimal teaching experience.

Conclusion

The composite picture of an ideal reading program is a complex one. It calls for small classes, adequate space, materials and physical facilities, individualized and group instruction, the use of thorough diagnosis and the presentation of skills in a systematic and hierarchical fashion. The reading teacher should be sensitive, well informed about reading, enthusiastic and organized. She should respect and

use student input and constantly strive to improve her skills in the teaching of reading. These are rather demanding standards for the program and for the teacher. Yet they are not so demanding when viewed as answers to the question, "What price are we willing to pay to help students learn to read?"

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